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DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN HEBREW LITERATURE

(Prof. Ruby B. Neville, of Jacksonville, Ill.)

The Hebrews were essentially a philosophic, subjective people in their highest literary expression, inclined to unbend in chorric dance and dramatic recital only incidentally. Still, no student can fail to see the brilliant dramatic elements of Hebrew literature. Dramatic recitative in romance and in history, dramatic poems and dialogs, are everywhere, and form a trooping pageantry of life records.

Let us notice a few sections of this moving pageant: a garden, an unexpected, unappreciated spirit of enterprise, piqued by elemental, human need; a daring adventure; then a voice in the cool of the day uttering judgment and a closed and barred Paradise with a "might have been" for man and God to think upon forever after, or the restless, ominous stir of an enslaved people to whom heaven sends two priceless blessings, an idea of liberty and an accredited leader; the refining fire of ten dramatic tests and a successful escape; for epilog the tossing helmets of Pharoah's hosts in the Red Sea and an exultant victory dance on the far shore. "Sing ye unto the Lord for he hath triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider hath he cast into the sea." How dramatic!

Or, again, two answering mountains and a multitude in the valley of decision swearing themselves out of the freedom and lawlessness of desert experience and into a commonwealth of fraternal obligation. The gate of a city on a sunny upland ridge and a young landowner pledging troth to a Moabite girl; the quick suggestion of four generations and "King David" for denouement. A lover and his lass on the slopes of Carmel; the lure and agony of a royal visitor to whom common folks dare not say no; broken hearts; a fruitless wooing in a city palace; a haunting dream and a blessed escape. A bronzed dresser of sycamore trees defying the open enmity of the priest at Bethel because "the Lord has spoken, who can but prophecy?" A young prince in Judah's sanctuary wrapped round with the glory of the Lord, eaten with the tragic knowledge of a purposeless, ignorant populace outside; a vision of opportunity, a dedication, "Here am I, oh Lord, send me," and the stage is set for a new scene in the Kingdom of God. The lone, fearless prince

giving an ultimatum to a weak and fearful monarch, "Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign," and the figure of the child that is to come, the sign through all subsequent history as men have traveled out of their inefficiencies and their fears toward the better day. The scene of the great assige of no land or time, wherein the writer of Dentero Isaiah embodies his dream of Isaiah's future, the nations of the world before the judgment bar; little, unlovely Israel in the midst answering their boast of power and wealth and prestige with his simple dedication of himself to a world's need; "Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. By his stripes we are healed." As a sort of complement, Paul before Agrippa in the splendid palace of Caesarea seven hundred years later; an eloquent plea, the cynical smile, the unresponsive heart of political pomp and subterfuge, and prison bars again for the prisoner; court adjourned, action continued. A very modern solution, too!

These scenes are full of dramatic feeling and dramatic movement. Such a survey, however, has brought us to no Hebrew or Jewish drama as such. Dramatic situations, dramatic forms, dramatic mood, and the characteristic objectification of material that is necessary in great drama are all to be found and with frequent instance, but formal drama seems not to have come to birth; no stage seems ever to have been built. No tragic mosque or high red heel or any other symbol of the drama ever belonged to them. Their genius lay elsewhere.

There seems to be clear though meagre evidence, however, that the Hebrews had something of the simple folk drama in which early tribal and religious consciousness is likely to express itself. Drama is only a step from the pantomimic dance, and we may easily infer that the dancing that formed a part of early Hebrew religious observance—note David's dance at the bringing up of the ark to Jerusalem—was pantomimic. Dancing was a regular feature also of the Feast of Tabernacles. Isaiah 30:29 says, "Ye shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept and gladness of heart as when one goeth with a pipe to come unto the mountain of Jehovah, to the rock of Israel." On the day before Tabernacles in later usage all went in procession, accompanied by the songs and instruments of the Levites. The occasion was decidedly hilarious and pantomime may have accompanied some of the events.

Pantomime without the dance has many examples in the prophets. Of the earlier instances we remember Ahijah's sign of the rent garment, premonitory of the divided Kingdom. Isaiah for two years went barefooted, and without his customary robes of rank as a sign to the people of threatened servitude. We recall, too, the later story of Jeremiah's demand that Isaiah read the words of his prophecy and then, in dramatic token of Babylon's coming doom, sink it in the Euphrates. We remember Ezekiel's joining of the two sticks in token of the reunion of Israel and Judah. Ezekiel is full of dramatic parable and of vision dramatically stated from the command to eat, the roll of the message that opens the book, to the vision of the dry bones and their quickening in chapter thirty-seven.

It has various instances of regular dumb show, also. The mimic siege and the shorn head are the prophets' proclamation of coming doom upon far-off Jerusalem. The twelfth chapter records the prophet's effort to stir the people by the little drama of the removal of his household goods through a breach in the house wall. What a spectacle for neighborhood comment! Many other instances might be cited of this simple method of pantomime by which the prophets emphasized their messages to those who sought their wisdom or to those whose attention they would challenge. But again we must remind ourselves that pantomime and dance alone or together do not bring us to drama in the true sense.

We shall probably find greater satisfaction in noting the dramatic coloring and dramatic manipulation given to other forms. Moulton's "Modern Readers' Bible" has been of untold help in securing a better literary appreciation of Hebrew and Jewish books for the casual reader. Dr. Moulton's method of printing shows at a glance the presence of a strong dramatic sense modifying other forms. The essentially epical Job is in such a page treatment all but won to true dramatic form. And the lovely lyric sequence of the Song of Songs comes perhaps safely within the category of drama if certain interpretations be followed. The pages of prophets and sages and wisemen are made particularly appealing dramatically by such printing. The dramatic element is there and such printing but gives it just expression. What fine miniature drama confronts us in Psalm two—warring peoples, a newly crowned King and the

great autocrat above ruling all the hosts of men; in the suggestions of antiphonal choirs and formal procession in Psalm twenty-four; in the exultant recitals of Psalms ninety-five to one hundred and one hundred eleven to one hundred eighteen! Deborah's song is wonderfully dramatic not only in material but in movement. Nothing is lacking but an orchestra to make it great oratorio.

As Greek drama grew from collected songs of rhapsodists accompanied by Bacchic chorus, so Hebrew prophecy, Dr. Fowler reminds us, appears as sequences of great discourses elevated and ecstatic. Narrative, soliloquy, dialog and direct address, form a closely knit whole that appeal to us as most dramatic. I can but briefly allude to the dramatic movement of such combined elements in Dentero—Isaiah, Chapter forty, is a dramatic form standing as prolog to the great chapters that follow in which heaven and earth alike witness the providence of God that leads Israel to world service. He is the least among the nations, the one buffeted and despised, from whom men turn the face—stupid, feeble; yet chosen, exalted, sent on mission.

“All the ends of the earth
Shall see the salvation of our God
Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence,
Trust no unclean thing,
Go ye out of the midst of her,
Be ye clean for ye are the vessels of the Lord.
For ye shall not go out in haste—
Neither shall ye go out by flight,
For the Lord will go before you
And the God of Israel will be your rearward.”

And changing from an exhortation to Israel to what Dr. Moulton calls a chorus of the Nations celebrating Israel, the text continues:

“Surely he hath borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows.
Yet we did esteem him stricken
Smitten of God and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgression
He was bruised for our iniquities
The chastisement of our peace was upon him
And with his stripes we are healed.”

Considered as wholes, Job and the Song of Songs come nearest to drama.

Most of us are poor in the culture that comes through great literature. In the Bibles, big and little, that are as common in this country as the daily paper, there is a wealth of the greatest literature in the world; it is an unworked mine of educational and cultural material. Great as is one present need of the Bible for its stabilizing and spiritual power, we need it for its culture. And the cultural advantage of dramatic form and dramatic matter in the Bible is not the least.

Many a story or poem would stay in the memory of the student as a living seed of thought and conduct if seen as dramatic. Many a section not dramatic except in matter could be dramatized and even acted. I have often found that students have loved and really known certain Old Testament stories for the first time when they have dramatized them. Ruth, Esther and the lives of the patriarchs are often so treated. Many great prophetic passages could thus be made real to boys and girls and could be given dignity to older students. Most Bible teachers in our colleges lament the false reverence that has kept the Bible from associations with other history and literature that would make it more real. Its black ministerial coat has defeated its usefulness many a time. A frank and sympathetic comparison of its characters and themes and its literary form with other literatures ought to be helpful. The scores of great oratorios should be used as far as possible to supplement the value of the text and religious drama founded on the great characters of scripture should be written and acted with frankness and simplicity. The work in this line has been much more sincerely done the last few years than twenty-five years ago. Classes in day school and Sunday School might with great advantage study the greatness of Isaiah's work or Paul's work through dramatic presentation on the basis of information gathered by the class.

We speak of a far-off divine event. It is but the poetic expression of a very steady Christian hope of future good through harmony with God, but we must be aware ourselves and make all students aware, if possible—till they are drunk with the subject, fools of God in their hearts, however serene outwardly—of immediate divine events from which comes the

knitting up of all human life into a whole that is noble and good. There is salvation in the idea that God, the ongoing and achieving one, and man, also the achieving one, may strive together under the yoke of things as they are for the life that may be. Let us put dreams and purposes and dedications into the hearts of students through Bible study.

HOW TO TEACH THE LIFE WORK OF JESUS AND PAUL

(Professor W. H. Stearns of McKendree College.)

What we need to study might roughly be comprised under the following heads:

- (1) The Empire as the arena where Christianity began.
- (2) The Graeco-Roman civilization as the moulding influence of the period.
- (3) The old state religion and why it failed.
- (4) Other current religions and why they decayed.
- (5) The last stand of the old philosophies.
- (6) Christianity's advent.
- (7) The ethical and social teachings of Jesus.
- (8) The contribution of Paul and his travels in the West.
- (9) A continuance of this study down to the epochal reign of Constantine when the church had become an established factor in society.

Such a study would be based on one of the Gospels, probably Mark, and on the book of Acts with the Letters dropped in at their respective places. Let us bear in mind, also, that chronology and geography are the two eyes of history.

Another and useful course would be literary study of one of Paul's letters. The Corinthian correspondence, for example, would afford opportunity for refreshing the student's knowledge of ancient Greece in general and the Roman period in particular, would afford a splendid opportunity for keen literary study, and would prepare the way for a more wholesome respect for the writings of the New Testament for the masterly genius of Paul and for an appreciation of the gruelling experiences that moulded Christianity.

A course in the ethical teachings of Jesus with practical application to the present day issues would be taught to advantage. What Jesus said is true—not because He said it, but because it is eternally true.